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RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL LAW SYMPOSIUM

## The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum

Fostering the Voice of Civil Society in the International Legal Debate

POLINA BAIGAROVA — 24 January, 2018



When speaking of the role of Russia in the contemporary international legal debate, it is helpful not only to focus on particular topics and questions, but – as with all other debates – to start with the question, at what levels and in which formats such a legal debate takes place; which actors are actively engaged in it or can actively participate in it, and what impact it has. To analyse this, communication science experts use the Lasswell model of communication: “Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?” (Lasswell 1948) (1).

The [EU-Russia Civil Society Forum](#) (EU-Russland Zivilgesellschaftsforum e.V., CSF) and its EU-Russia [Legal Dialogue](#) programme (LD), established in 2015, aim to actively involve non-governmental actors in the dialogue on legal matters between the EU and Russia, and at the same time to both integrate and enhance the potentials offered by NGOs.

The goal is to develop and offer practical formats that, on the one hand, offer the actors in the civil society an opportunity to discuss current legal issues and practices in the EU and Russia – both in public and in safe spaces – and on the other hand, to reach out to the expert audience, policy makers and the general public with mutual issues.

The CSF network currently includes 161 NGOs and movements from Russia and 20 EU countries, working in a variety of fields. However, the circle of active participants and partners of the Legal Dialogue programme is much wider, including, for example, successful human rights lawyers from Russia, as listed by Professor Lauri Mälksoo (see [Strasbourg’s Effect on Russia – and Russia’s Effect on Strasbourg](#)), or the Law Clinics in Russia, Germany and other EU countries.

The variety of topics within the Legal Dialogue programme is as diverse as its participants. Debates on fundamental legal conditions for civic activities are as important as imparting and securing the values such as respect for human rights and the rule of law, division of powers, the responsibility of governments, the compliance of administrations and the independence of courts.

Such diversity of topics is well reflected on the online platform [www.legal-dialogue.org](http://www.legal-dialogue.org) (Legal Dialogue Journal, LDJ). The purpose of this interactive platform is to exchange current and topically relevant information for NGOs, their networks, other experts and

the general public in Russia and the EU. It contains analytical articles, practical reports and further links in fields such as NGO legislation, immigration law, freedom of information, gender equality, environmental law, labour law, forms of legal aid and others besides. All those interested in LDJ have an opportunity to suggest questions for colleagues and the international expert audience. For example, a question on the existing healthcare requirements for asylum seekers raised by a German expert has resulted in reports from Russia, Italy, Poland and Romania. In the future, this interactive element is to be strengthened further. The platform has grown considerably in the course of just one year and is in active development now. The LDJ is striving to reflect as well as to shape all the diverse aspects of the legal debate both nationally and internationally. Suggestions on topics and formats are always very welcome!

The LDJ website also offers a calendar with upcoming international conferences, seminars, summer schools and similar events taking place in Russia and other EU countries. There is an option to apply for a CSF travel grant (calls for applications are announced separately). These grants are available for those who wish to attend expert events and for hosts wishing to invite international experts to an event (from Russia to the EU and vice versa). The aim is to support further networking and exchange, to foster the voice of civil society in expert discussions and by doing so contribute to the intensification of the legal dialogue between Russia and the EU at the civic level. Experience and observations made at these events can also be shared through the LDJ platform, as was the case with the 41 session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in Krakow (2017).

Another well-established format of the Legal Dialogue programme is the annual international Legal Dialogue Symposium that takes place in Berlin. Here, NGO experts, practicing lawyers and budding legal professionals discuss the current legislation trends in Russia and the EU as well as the role of civil society in the shaping of the rule of law – both amongst themselves and with representatives from ministries, the media and think tanks. The main subject of a symposium is defined by current trends and the discussion needs of the ever-growing Legal Dialogue network, as in the following examples: Domestic Law in a Global Upswing? The Strained Relationship between International and Domestic Law (2016) and Threat Perceptions – Drivers for Policy Change in Russia and the EU? (2017). Issues raised in the Legal Dialogue Journal publications and topic suggestions made by scholarship holders or colleagues from the wider CSF network are integrated into the conference programme (as round tables, workshops, working groups, brainstorming sessions, work on concept papers, open space sessions etc.). Discussion results are processed and presented as videos and articles for the Legal Dialogue Journal.

One of the Legal Dialogue's special target groups are emerging legal professionals, who often lack first-hand experience with topics and working modes relevant to civil society, especially in Russia. In keeping with the general subject of immigration law, Legal Dialogue organised a number of theoretical and practical seminars at the international summer school 'Future Lawyers: Essential Skills to Success' that took place at the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Kaliningrad. LD also played an active part in the intense discussion concerning the possible establishment of Russian Refugee Law Clinics using the European model (i.a. by conducting an all-Russian Law Clinics survey on the potentials of the co-operation with refugees and migrants and by organising workshops in Moscow).

Legal Dialogue is a very open and flexible programme aiming to further enhance the existing international networks of legal experts and to develop new ones in order to discuss the topics of relevance for civil society. The successful outcome of involving

Russia in the international legal dialogue largely depends on the active involvement of civil society. The EU-Russia Civil Society Forum is looking forward to new format suggestions and ideas for co-operation.

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(1): Lasswell, Harold D. (1948): The Structure and Function of Communication in Society. In: Bryson, Lyman (Eds.) The Communication of Ideas. A Series of Addresses. New York, S. 32–51.

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*Polina Baigarova has been coordinating the Legal Dialogue Programme for the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum since 2015.*

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